

June 23, 2015

The Honorable Jose Huizar
Councilmember, District 14
200 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Re: Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness

Dear Councilmember Huizar,

Thank you for establishing the Ad Hoc Committee on Homelessness. We agree that now is the time to comprehensively address homelessness in the City of Los Angeles and have formed a working group to inform the committee. Our working group is focused on Downtown Los Angeles however, many of the suggestions we offer can be effective citywide. Based on the 2015 Homeless Count there has been a 12% increase in homelessness in the City of Los Angeles and Skid Row continues to be the epicenter. The number of tents, makeshift shelters, and vehicles has increased since 2013 from 5,335 to 9,535.

Homelessness is a human tragedy and there is no place more tragic than the Skid Row area of Downtown Los Angeles - ground zero for homelessness in the United States. Skid Row consists of 52 square blocks with approximately 3,463 homeless men and women living in shelters and on the streets. This neighborhood represents the most concentrated area of homeless people in the country.

Governance Solutions

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) is a joint powers authority of the City and the County of Los Angeles, and is the clearing house for the disbursement of homelessness-related funds. It is an active commission of appointed, citizen-members, which has been given a very large task without the necessary authority to accomplish it. The LAHSA commission should be redesigned to help break down its various silos. We propose that LAHSA be reorganized from an appointed commission to a true joint powers authority, comprised of the head of each County and City department who administer homeless services. Ideally this would include, but not be limited to, Department of Mental Health, Department of Public Health, the Department of Child and Family Services and the appropriate City departments.

We agree that the City needs to create an exempt, non-civil service "general manager" level position to end homelessness, including the establishment of measurable outcomes. This person should be part of the City Administrative Office and focus on homeless resource coordination. Other responsibilities should include improving coordination among departments such as the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, LAPD, the City Attorney, Bureaus of Street Services and Sanitation, and elected officials' offices. This position should also serve on the LAHSA commission. The position must be given the resources and ability by the City

to be successful in this role. This position should also directly liaise with the business community on possible public/private partnerships.

This “general manager” could also partner with LAHSA to fully develop Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). HMIS should be able to tell us how many people are served in each program, their length of stay and exit destination and how often people experience repeat episodes of homelessness. A fully operating HMIS should allow the community to examine the average length of homeless by program and program type, the cost effectiveness of different programs and whether people are serving their target populations or being inappropriately screened out. A detailed HMIS could lead to performance based contracting and help the City and County effectively utilize resources.

Operation Healthy Streets (OHS) in Skid Row

The City established OHS in response to a citation issued in 2012 by the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (DPH) and has committed significant resources. Through OHS, the City has provided resources to increase outreach and emergency services, street cleanings and the provision of storage services for the area. Although the City has committed significant resources to OHS, Skid Row continues to be a highly unsanitary and unsafe area. There are multiple encampments and personal goods blocking the sidewalks, and while we realize this happening across the City, there is no place that has the same magnitude as Skid Row.

We believe the sanitary condition of Skid Row must be addressed on at least a weekly basis through OHS and the City should partner with the County’s Department of Mental Health (DMH) to have a clinician partner with Sanitation when OHS is taking place. The clinician can connect homeless individuals with resources. Currently, DMH has a mobile team in Skid Row and is partnering with the Los Angeles Police Department and the City should leverage this resource.

The City should also ask DPH to reassess the Skid Row area, this will help assess if OHS is frequent enough to be effective.

Enforcement Options in Skid Row

The City needs to directly combat criminal activity taking place in Skid Row by declaring a Limited Zone of Enforcement in conjunction with the establishment of a permanent Homeless Citation Court. Skid Row is an area unreasonably impacted by homelessness and has numerous sensitive receptors, including people in recovery. Designating Skid Row as a Limited Zone of Enforcement could lead to increased penalties for drug dealing and other criminal activity. To be clear, we proposing that the Limited Zone of Enforcement would only be utilized to combat criminal activity taking place in Skid Row and it would not be utilized to enforce sit, sleep, lie or eating laws. All too often, Skid Row is place where over dose deaths, stabbings,

fight, rapes, and fires take place on a regular basis and this zone is desperately needed.

The purpose of the Homeless Citation Court is to leverage enforcement opportunities and complement the Limited Zone of Enforcement. For example, if a person receives a citation for using drugs, they receive options: pay a fine, go to jail, or accept services. The County of Los Angeles has authorized funding for three positions to operate a Homeless Citation Court and the City should also fund this program to allow for more case workers to follow up with homeless individuals and connect them with services and housing. We need to be strategic in resource coordination and should partner with the County in this endeavor.

Resource Coordination in Skid Row

Homeless individuals come to Skid Row because there is a concentration of services. We should plan for this and meet people at entry points. There should be LAHSA caseworkers present at Twin Towers Jail, Union Station and the regional bus station on Alameda. This would help connect people with proper services.

The Coordinated Entry System (CES) is still in the early phases of implementation, but will be a very useful tool to make sure the most vulnerable individuals are housed. We know CES is administered in geographically specific areas like Downtown and that as existing appropriate housing units are vacated, individuals in the CES receive priority. We would like the City to approach HUD and ask for a waiver of Fair Housing Laws to give preference to homeless individuals living in Skid Row and in the CES to new permanent supportive housing units being built in Downtown Los Angeles.

There are many factors that contribute to homelessness and we must do all we can to stabilize the Skid Row area. Skid Row deserves to become a healthy place for all community stakeholders.

Regional Homelessness Solutions

Permanent supportive housing is an effective way to address homelessness, but it is not the only method we should be pursuing to provide an alternative to life on the street. Not every homeless individual is ready for permanent supportive housing and there is a need to promote different options, such as detoxification centers, temporary shelters and semi-permanent transitional housing. We support the conversion of existing facilities and services in Skid Row to serve homeless individuals however, we do not support any new services in Skid Row.

The City should consider creating incentives that would encourage property owners to allow for their vacant properties to be used for transitional housing on an interim basis. Unfortunately, any type of housing for homeless individuals can be extremely hard to site and the City should consider the development of an express

permitting system to allow for property owners to temporarily site housing for homeless individuals in an expedited manner. The City should also consider an ordinance that would mandate homeless services in every community. The ordinance findings could be based on overcrowding, lack of affordable housing and lack of fair share. Both of these approaches could help to regionalize homeless services

As you know, there is a concentration of homeless services in Skid Row and almost every effort to address homelessness has been employed. From bathrooms that are available 24/7 -to portable toilets in the streets -to public showers- Skid Row can share lessons learned. The portable toilets that once lined Skid Row were a public health and safety disaster and were removed. The showers and laundry facility that were at LAMP were closed after two murders. As we discuss intermittent ways to assist homeless individuals we must be conscientious of services that would keep them on the street like portable toilets and public showers. These facilities are a high public cost compared to more permanent facilities and we encourage the City to support sustainable solutions.

We need to make sure that in all shelter, transitional housing and permanent supportive housing locations there are case workers who can help homeless individuals qualify for Social Security Income (SSI) benefits. General Relief in the County of Los Angeles is \$221 per month and most people who are homeless would qualify for SSI benefits, raising their income to about \$800 per month which would make more housing options accessible. There is also a housing subsidy program the County administers with General Relief, but it is limited to 1000 people per year. The City should partner with the County to take this program to scale and allow more people to utilize it.

Advocacy for Homeless Individuals

Many homeless individuals are mentally ill and are not receiving the services they deserve. There has to be more State-funded hospital beds for mentally ill homeless individuals so they can stabilize and recover. This is a critical piece to ending the revolving door between jail and homelessness. We know there are approximately 3,500 mentally ill individuals in jail who need to receive care. All too often these people are referred to a hospital bed in place of jail; however there are no beds available. The Department of Justice recently found that there are serious deficiencies in the mental health care delivery system in Los Angeles County jails. Jails are not the place to treat mentally ill individuals. We must all come together to effectively advocate to the State to fund hospital beds through Proposition 63 and other funds for those who most need treatment.

We also need to focus on changing the Federal funding formula for homeless assistance - the McKinney-Vento Act. The Act disburses funds to States based on the age of the housing stock and population growth lag, but neither relate to the

root causes of homelessness. The City should continue to advocate at the Federal level for a funding formula based on poverty levels, housing rent burden, availability of affordable housing and rates of overcrowding. This will help bring additional resources to California.

We are encouraged by all the good work that has been to date on homelessness and recognize the challenges as well as efforts underway with the Coordinated Entry System. We hope we can build on the good momentum and continue to seek solutions to addressing homelessness.

Sincerely,

Carol Schatz
President & CEO
Central City Association

Raquel Beard
Executive Director
Central City East Association